

Cherry Hill SDA church a 'total loss' after overnight fire

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Firefighters were called to the church at 11:35 p.m. Tuesday night, and found the building fully engulfed in flames. Firefighters did not enter the building because of unsafe conditions. (Baltimore Sun photo by Jed Kirschbaum/ December 24, 2008)

As members of the [Cherry Hill](#) Seventh Day Adventist Church began learning today of the overnight fire that destroyed their center of worship, the church's pastor vowed to hold regular services this Saturday and to work to rebuild.

Reached by telephone, Pastor T. DuWayne Privette said he was visiting family this week in Ohio when he got word about 4 a.m. this morning that his church had burned to the ground. He's been in touch with other church officials, booked a 1 p.m. flight back to Baltimore, and talked to the insurance company that covered the church property, in the 2800 block of Joplea Road.

The church didn't have any planned services for today or tomorrow, [Christmas Day](#). But he said he hopes another church is willing to open its doors to help them hold their regular service this Saturday.

"Pending that the Lord opens up a church for us, we will be in worship service," Privette said. "Just to give everybody an opportunity to come together and worship in a time of crisis. It's very important we have a church on Saturday. But whether we have a church or not, we're going to worship."

Privette said the church was founded more than 30 years ago, by members who met in a small house. In 1988, the house was razed and a one-story church was built on the same property by the members. The church has grown to about 170 members, and offers [bible study](#), an afternoon youth program, a food pantry and pastoral services in the community, he said.

According to city fire officials, the firefighters were called to the church at 11:35 p.m. last night, and found the building fully engulfed in flames. Firefighters did not enter the building because of unsafe conditions, including the buckling of one of the exterior walls. No injuries were reported and no one was inside the building. Fire investigators are still trying to determine its cause, according to Chief Kevin Cartwright, a Fire Department spokesman.

Jimmy Ferguson, a former pastor at the church from 1993 to 1997, went to see the charred ruins this morning and to help protect the church from possible looting. His assessment of the damage was grim.

"It is a total loss," Ferguson said. "When you see it, you might as well sweep it all up and put it in the trash."

He said he thought the older, charter members, who were involved in building the church, were going to be devastated when they see the ruins.

"Oh man, oh man," he continued. "This place is gone."